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SUBJECT: JORDAN: POET'S PRISON SENTENCE FOR "SLANDERING
ISLAM" DENOUNCED AS ATTACK AGAINST FREE SPEECH

REF: 08 AMMAN 2973

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Jordanian poet Islam Samhan was sentenced on June 22 to one year in prison and fined 14,000 USD for using Koranic verses in his published book of poetry. He was charged with "slandering Islam" and "insulting religious sentiment," although he says many of the prosecution's witnesses had never actually read the poems in question. While Samhan plans to appeal the case, he does not believe he will win without "royal intervention" because the Grand Mufti of Jordan has issued a fatwa against him. Samhan's case has garnered worldwide attention. The Ambassador raised the issue with Chief of the Royal Court Nasser Lozi in a June 24 meeting. Lozi acknowledged that the verdict was harmful to Jordan's international image and that officials were looking for a way to resolve the issue. End Summary.

Verdict Issued in Poet's Case

¶2. (U) Islam Samhan, a 27-year-old poet and cultural news editor of Al Arab Al Yawn newspaper, was sentenced on June 22, to one year in prison and fined 14,000 USD after a court found him guilty of "slandering Islam." The charges included "insulting religious sentiment" because of his incorporation of Koranic verses in his poetry collection, "Grace Like a Shadow."

¶3. (U) The case was initially filed in October 2008 by the Press and Publications Department, which accused Samhan of using sentences and quotes from the Koran in a manner that "insulted prophets and religious sentiments," although Samhan's work never actually named any prophets or religious leaders.

¶4. (SBU) On his lawyer's advice, Samhan did not to attend the court session when the verdict was announced so that he could benefit from provisions for those sentenced in absentia. (Note: According to Jordanian law, those sentenced in absentia are given two months to file an appeal as opposed to the one month for those actually present to hear the verdict. End Note.)

Paying A High Price for His Poetry

¶5. (SBU) In discussions with PolOff on June 23, Samhan said that he had not expected a guilty verdict. Both he and his pro bono attorney believed he would be acquitted due to the insurmountable evidence in his favor. He said he had received permission from the Press and Publications Department to publish his book of poetry and, throughout his trial, it was clear he had in no way offended Islam. Samhan also added that during cross examination, many of the prosecution's witnesses clearly had never even read the poems in question.

¶6. (SBU) Samhan told PolOff he believes the guilty verdict was influenced by Grand Mufti Nooh Al Qudah, who spoke out against the book after reading an article on the website Ammon News (en.ammonnews.net). He subsequently issued a fatwa against Samhan and the book was banned although it had already been in print for eight months and the Ministry of Culture had even bought 50 copies. Samhan maintains the Grand Mufti continues to personally target him. (Note: The Grand Mufti, Jordan's highest spiritual leader, was appointed by royal decree in 2006. While the GOJ, through the Ministry of Awqaf issues guidance to imams, the King's Religious Affairs Advisor, Price Ghazi, confirmed during a recent conversation with a visiting CODEL that the Grand Mufti is nevertheless viewed as Jordan's most influential religious leader. End Note.)

¶7. (SBU) Samhan told PolOff he and his family have paid a high price throughout this process, suffering harassment, threats, and living in constant fear. Following the June 22 verdict, he has been called a "dog" and an "apostate" and he now lives in total isolation. Samhan confided that he feels especially threatened because he lives in the very conservative Zarga region of Jordan and his home is just a few kilometers from the former residence of deceased Al Qaeda leader Abu Mosad Al Zargawi.

Fearful of What Lies Ahead

¶8. (SBU) While his lawyer plans to appeal the case, Samhan is not optimistic about the outcome. He does not believe the judge exercised judicial independence and in an emotional and

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tearful June 23 meeting with PolOff, Samhan revealed he does not have faith in an appeal. He said his only hope is "royal intervention." Samhan also believes the conservative religious leadership will continue to intervene which will ultimately result in his imprisonment. Many parties voiced their hatred for Samhan, including the Islamic Action Front, which published a statement against him. While Samhan remains fearful for his life, he personally fears imprisonment even more. Samhan was jailed in October 2008 for four days while awaiting his first court appearance with the public prosecutor. During that time, he said he was housed with rapists and murderers and suffered psychologically.

Journalist Association Support Could Dwindle

¶9. (SBU) The Jordan Writers Association has been a strong supporter, but Samhan believes that upcoming association elections will usher in new leaders who will not have the same views and his case will "drop from their agenda." He believes the current leadership is also politicizing his high profile case in advance of the elections. Samhan noted that he had approached the Center for Defending the Freedom of Journalists for help but was turned away when they told him his case involved "poetry not journalism." Samhan added the Center subsequently came to him and offered its help only after his case garnered worldwide media attention, including a recent interview on BBC. He has refused the "new" offer, as he questions their motivations for this offer of assistance.

Ambassador Raises Issue at Royal Court

¶10. (C) In a June 24 meeting with Nasser Lozi, Chief of the Royal Court, the Ambassador raised Samhan's case. The Ambassador emphasized that the case is drawing worldwide attention and reflects negatively on Jordan's human rights record, as evidenced by a thick file of press reports that the Ambassador delivered. Lozi told the Ambassador that the issue is being discussed and acknowledged that Jordanian

officials recognize the verdict is harming Jordan's public image.

¶11. (C) Comment: Although Jordan projects an international image of a country that respects human rights and freedom of speech, cases like this demonstrate how much work remains. The 2004 Amman Message pledged to seek "balanced Islamic solutions" for human rights issues and set forth objective preconditions for the issuance of fatwas but none of these ideals are evident when reviewing Islam Samhan's case. End Comment.

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